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ABSTRACT

The National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress, administers a free national library program for persons with visual or physical handicaps who cannot use normal print materials. The following features of this service are discussed: (1) types of materials chosen (full-length books and magazines for adults and children at all grade levels except those with short attention spans or those who need high-interest, low- vocabulary materials); (2) media and equipment (braille and recorded discs and cassettes which require special cassette and record players); (3) distribution mechanism (to cooperating regional and subregional libraries that circulate the materials to eligible borrowers); (4) legislative authority and eligibility (expansion of the program by Public Law 89-522 to include individuals with physical impairments that prevent the reading of regular print in a normal manner); (5) the physical disabilities covered (which exclude non-physically based reading disabilities), and requirements for medical certification of reading disabilities; (6) application procedure (including an address for forms and information); (7) Recording for the Blind Program (including the distinctions between this private organization and the NLS and an address and phone number for further information); and (8) an address and phone number for acquiring further information about the NLS. (BRM)

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National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

The Library of Congress

Washington, DC 20542

March 1989

Talking Books and Reading Disabilities

Background

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), Library of Congress, administers a free national library program for visually and physically handicapped persons who cannot use normal print library materials. With the cooperation of authors and publishers who grant permission to use copyrighted works without royalty, NLS selects and produces full-length books and magazines on recorded disc and cassette and in braille. Reading materials are distributed to a network of cooperating regional and subregional libraries where they are circulated to eligible borrowers. Special cassette and record players are needed to listen to these books on cassette and disc because they are recorded to play at slower than normal speeds, e.g., 8-1/3 rpm discs and 15/16 ips cassettes. Reading materials and special machines are sent to borrowers and returned to libraries by postage-free mail. The book collections consist of recreational and general informational reading for adults and children at all grade levels. Books are selected on the basis of their appeal to a wide range of interests and include bestsellers, biographies, and general fiction.

The NLS collections are recorded primarily for visually or physically handicapped adults and children, those who are physically handicapped to such a degree that their impairment makes it difficult or impossible for them to hold or handle a standard printed book. Each book is narrated at a fast pace, without background music or special sound effects. The materials at any given reading level are not geared to children or adults with short attention spans or to those who need high-interest, low-vocabulary books. Textbooks and curriculum-oriented and remedial reading materials are not included in the NLS book collections.

Public Law 89-522

The NLS program was established by an act of Congress in 1931 to serve blind adults. The program was expanded in 1952 to include blind children and in 1966 by Public Law 89-522 to include individuals with physical impairments that prevent the reading of regular or normal print.

EC 232640

Eligibility of Persons with Reading Disabilities

Public Law 89-522 states that materials will be loaned to readers "certified by competent authority as unable to read normal printed material as a result of physical limitations, under regulations prescribed by the Librarian of Congress for this service." The current federal regulation for this program is set forth in the Federal Register for June 7, 1974, as amended October 2, 1981. Individuals with reading disabilities are not expressly covered by this statute. Under Public Law 89-522, only persons whose reading disabilities are physically based are eligible for the NLS talking-book program. Furthermore, the reading disability must be certified by competent authority, described below, as having a physical basis before an applicant is considered eligible for the talking-book program. An individual whose reading disability does not have a physical origin is not eligible.

Applications for service from individuals claiming a reading disability based on a physical handicap must establish the following facts:

1. the reading disability must be of sufficient severity to prevent reading regular or normal printed material in a normal manner,

2. the cause of the disability must be physically based, that is, it must be an organic dysfunction, and

3. the person certifying the application must be medically able to judge whether the disability has a physical or organic basis.

The following groups of individuals are not automatically eligible: those who are learning disabled, functionally illiterate, or mentally retarded, unless there is a specific accompanying visual or physical handicap.

Competent Authority

For most eligible people served by this program, the cause of the inability to read printed material--such as blindness, paralysis, loss of arms or hands, extreme weakness, or palsy--is readily observable. In these cases, professionals in various fields related to health care, education, or rehabilitation are acceptable as certifying authorities. With persons classified as reading disabled, usually only the effect is readily apparent. The cause, when physical, lies within the central nervous system, and, under the existing regulation, this cause can be determined only by competent medical authority.

The signature of a doctor of medicine or doctor of osteopathy is required by federal regulation on the application to certify not only that a reading disability exists and is serious enough to prevent reading regular printed material in a normal manner, but also that the identified condition has a physical basis. Nonorganic factors--such as emotional or environmental causes,

intellectual or educational deficiencies, mental retardation, or other possible nonorganic or nonphysical causes--must be ruled out and cannot be taken into consideration. When certifying applications for service for persons with reading disabilities, certifying medical authorities are encouraged to consult with colleagues in associated disciplines.

Application Procedure

A standard application form and additional information about this free library service may be obtained from any regional or subregional library for the blind and physically handicapped. Individuals may also write to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20542 for an application form and the addresses of cooperating libraries. The completed application, signed by a doctor of medicine or doctor of osteopathy in the case of a reading disability, should be submitted to the cooperating library serving the applicant's geographic area.

Recording for the Blind Program

Recording for the Blind (RFB) is a private organization that lends free recorded textbooks and other educational materials to blind and visually handicapped people or those with specific learning-disabilities who are eligible under its own policies. There is a small registration fee for RFB service. Some applicants for NLS service with reading disabilities are already receiving service from RFB, and they expect that the RFB certification will suffice for the NLS talking-book program. However, RFB has its own eligibility criteria for persons with specific learning disabilities that differ from the NLS requirements. (RFB has more flexibility in its policies because it is a private, nonprofit voluntary organization; NLS, however, can provide service only to those who meet the federal statutory requirements.)

Detailed information about the RFB program and its availability for reading-disabled persons, and applications for service are available from:

Recording for the Blind, Inc.
20 Roszel Road
Princeton, NJ 08540

(609) 452-0606

RFB does not provide playback equipment to its patrons, and often its borrowers are referred to NLS network libraries for loan of equipment. NLS cooperating network libraries can loan equipment only to those who: (1) meet the eligibility requirements of the NLS program, which include providing a detailed application, certified as required by NLS regulations described above; and (2) will actively borrow and use NLS reading materials. Applicants receiving RFB books who are not eligible for loan of NLS equipment must obtain their own playback equipment. Suitable equipment with the necessary 15/16 ips and 4-track

playback capability for RFB books is available for purchase from a number of sources. Contact the NLS Reference Section for information about such sources. (Reference Section, NLS/BPH, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20542)

Summary

To fulfill the NLS statutory obligations, assure the continuity of this program, honor the agreements that furnish NLS with cost-free copyright permission, and protect the free-matter-for-the-blind-and-handicapped mailing privileges, NLS must ensure conformance with the regulations governing this program. If you have any questions about the eligibility and certification of those with reading or learning disabilities, please refer them to:

Chief, Network Division
National Library Service for the
Blind and Physically Handicapped
Library of Congress
Washington, DC 20542

(202) 707-0713

Network Division 1/89